Short Story and Poetry Workbook

**Poetry Examples and Exercises:**

***The Road not Taken***

**Robert Frost**

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveller, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that, the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leaves on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

Question One – What do you think this poem is about? How do you know?

Question Two – I would now like you to create a poem in a similar style.

***The Door***

**Miroslav Holub**

**Translated from Czech by Ian Milner**

Go and open the door.

Maybe outside there’s a tree, or a wood,

A garden,

Or a magic city.

Go and open the door.

Maybe a dog’s rummaging.

Maybe you’ll see a face,

Or an eye,

Or the picture

Of a picture.

Go and open the door.

If there’s a fog

It will clear.

Go and open the door.

Even if there’s only

The darkness ticking,

Even if there’s only

The hollow wind,

Even if

Nothing

Is there,

Go and open the door.

At least

There’ll be

A draught.

Question One – What is the door in the poem a metaphor for?

Question Two – What is the importance of taking chances in life?

Question Three – I would like you to write your own poem with a similar thematic style

***Everyone hates the English***

**Kit Wright**

Everyone hates the English,

Including the English. They sneer

At each other for being so English,

So what are they doing here,

The English? It’s *thick* with the English,

All over the country. Why?

Anyone every born English

Should shut up, or fuck off, or die.

Anyone ever born English

Should hold their extraction in scorn

And apologise all over England

For ever at all being born,

For that is how it is, being English;

Fodder for any old scoff

That England might be a nice country

If only the English fucked off!

Question One – Do you believe this poem is satirical or genuine? Why?

Question Two – Create a derogatory poem about Australians in a similar style

***Do Not Go Gentle into The Good Night***

**Dylan Thomas**

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at the end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightening they

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,

And lean, too late, they grieved it on its way,

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Question One – What do you think it means to ‘not go gentle into that good night’?

Question Two – What does it mean to ‘rage, rage against the dying of the light’?

Question Three – Discuss in table groups why death is such a prevalent theme for poets

Question Four – Write a poem about how you wish to approach death when it comes.

***Do not stand at my grave and weep***

**Anonymous**

Do not stand at my grave and weep;

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning’s hush

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

Question One – What does this poem reveal about the poets thoughts on life after death?

Question Two – What are your thoughts about life after death?

Question Three – Create a poem that details what you believe will happen to you after death, this may be religiously based, or some may write a poem merely about rotting in the ground

**All the World’s a Stage**

**William Shakespeare**

All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,

Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.

And then the whining school boy, with his satchel,

And shining morning face, creeping like snail

Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad

Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,

Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,

Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel

Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,

In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,

With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,

Full of wise saws and modern instances;

And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

His youthful hose well sav’d, a world too wide

For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,

Turning again towards childish treble, pipes

And whistles his sound. Last scene of all,

That ends this strange, eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion,

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Question One – This poem has several words I would like you to check a dictionary for meaning, shank, sans, mewling, puking, pard, pantaloon

Question Two – this poem is about an average mans life in the sixteenth century, what are the differences between this life and life in the 21st century

Question Three – What event is missing from the poem? Why do you think this is?

Question Four – Write a poem about a life story in modern Australia, it could be the way you believe your life will pan out, or it could based on a fictitious person or friend.

**Fable**

**Janos Pilinszky**

**Translated from Hungarian by Ted Hughes**

Once upon a time

There was a lonely wolf

Lonelier than the angels.

He happened to come to a village.

He fell in love with the first house he saw.

Already he loved its walls

The caresses of its bricklayers

But the windows stopped him.

In the room sat people

Apart from God nobody ever

Found them so beautiful

As this childlike beast.

So at night he went into the house.

He stopped in the middle of the room

And never moved from there any more.

He stood all through the night, with wide eyes

And on into the morning when he was beaten to death.

Question One – This poem is a fable because it has a moral message, what do you think that message is?

Question Two – Why do you think the poet chose a wolf for the central character?

Question Three – I want you to create a poem with a moral, like this poem create a metaphor to carry the message to the reader.

**Poetry Exercise One:**

You’re a genius. Shake off your natural modesty. Although it’s difficult to praise yourself, the idea is to uncover powers you didn’t know you had. Talk yourself up in a way that will dumbfound your friends. Think of yourself in relation to the world we live in and everything in it, and find comparisons which put you on an equal footing with the most impressive phenomena you can think of. The following is an example.

Tomaz Salamun you are a genius

You are wonderful you are a joy to behold

You are great you are a giant

You are strong and powerful you are phenomenal

You are the greatest of all time

You are the king you are possessed of great wealth

You are a genius Tomaz Salamun

In harmony with all creation we have to admit that

You are a lion the planets pay homage to you

The sun turns her face to you every day

You are just everything you are Mount Ararat

You are perennial you are the morning star

You are without beginning or end

You have no shadow no fear

You are the light you are the fire from heaven

Behold the eyes of Tomaz Salamun

Behold the brilliant radiance of the sky

Behold his arms behold his loins behold him striding forth

Behold him touching the ground

Your skin bears the scent of nard

Your hair is like solar dust

The stars are amazed who is amazed at the stars

The sea is blue who is the sky’s guardian

You are the boat on high seas

That no wind no storm can destroy

You are the mountain rising from the plain

The lake in the desert.

**Poetry Exercise Two**

An exercise which involves every participant choosing a profession – for example – ‘surgeon’, ‘undertaker’, ‘detective’, ‘hangman’ but also some that are unexpected like ‘mime-artist’, ‘terrorist’. The poem you write will be in the persona of someone with the profession you have chosen. The idea is that someone reading your poem would understand what profession you are writing about – although the better poems will make that harder to guess. The poem must be written in couplets and the following is a list of what has to go in each set.

Line One and Two – You are in a room, looking out of a window

Line Three and Four – You stop looking out of the window, but you’re still in the room

Line Five and Six – Something happens, either in the room or out of it

Line Seven and Eight – You remember something that happened to you recently

Line Nine and Ten – You leave the room

Line Eleven and Twelve – You wish for something

Line Thirteen and Fourteen – these are two free lines, you can do what you want here, but remember you have to bring the poem to a close.

Make sure your poem is not full sentences. Go through your poem and ensure that it has an internal rhythm, it can rhyme if you’re not sure about internal rhythm at this stage.

The following is an example of a poem based on the profession of veterinarian.

The white walls fade

As I glance at transparent glass.

Reality claws at me

I return to my white cell.

The furry mound is still

I can’t stand losing another.

Pictures in my mind

Lives turned to memories.

Running from my cell

I vow never to return.

I pray for salvation

Hope for life.

Yet I know that I am powerless

Only He chooses who lives, who dies.

**Poetry Exercise Three:**

The Bad Box. You are to create your own bad box poem, full of everything you don’t like in this world. You need to be as precise as possible – nothing like ‘war’ or ‘disease’. What war, what disease? Your first three, four line stanzas, are to detail what you would place in your bad box and the final stanza will detail how you will get rid of your box. The following poem is an example.

I will put in the box

The cooks responsible for school dinners,

Ads in the cinema and tabloid newspapers,

The leaders of the Bosnian Serbs.

I will put in the box

Hijackers and bombers who blow up planes,

People who smoke in no-smoking compartments

Or whose personal stereos leak rap.

I will put in the box

Windowboxes full of chrysanthemums,

Crooked ministers and racist policemen,

Poems that are vague with bad rhyme.

I will electrocute my box

Until it’s molten and glowing,

And all fused together,

Then I’ll catapult it into orbit –

It might become a small moon.

**Short Story Examples and Exercises:**

**Furlough**

**Nigel Krauth**

Every fortnight, for more than a year, those letters had been arriving. Addressed to her mother, in her father’s exact hand, they were always on the same creamy, almost transparent paper. She had watched her mother’s hands quiver as she removed them from their envelopes. The rustle of that flimsy paper unfolding was the sound of the war for her. She knew her mother dreaded the inclusion of a note in another hand, something that might say: *We found this among his belongings...*Her mother would sit down in the kitchen to read the letters and cry, out of happiness and loneliness, fingering the medal he had sent early on from the Middle East. And Patricia would pretend she did not notice it, clutched there in her mother’s tense and moving hand.

Then came the arrangements for his furlough in Sydney. Just three days. He was seconded to the American Navy in New Guinea now, piloting the big warships into Finschhafen. He would not be away for long. *Book three days at the Manly Hotel*, the letter said. *We’ll live it up. We’ll do it in style.*

They carried their bags from the ferry wharf along the Corso towards the hotel. There were cars in the street with their headlamps blacked over. Many of the shop windows were boarded up, with just peepholes for looking at the goods on display. She put down her bag to peer in at a line of store dummies. The prices on the clothes were expressed in war coupons. Twelve coupons for a smart dress. ‘Come on,’ her mother said.

At the hotel she was surprised when the desk clerk gave her a key of her own. Her mother took another key to a suite on the first floor overlooking the promenade and the beach, but Patricia had to go on down the dim hallway to a small room at the back of the building. She pulled the curtain aside from the window and looked out on grey backyards and laneways.

When he arrived in the lobby he was wearing the handsome tan uniform the Americans wore. She watched her mother reach up to press her mouth on his. They clung together. She waited her turn, and saw, when his captain’s cap fell off, the increased baldness of his head and the darkness of the sun-glossed skin on his scalp. Then he turned to her. ‘How’s my girl Pattie?’ He said, hugging her. She smelt the starch of the hard uniform, and its tropical mustiness. Her mother did not let go of his arm.

She went upstairs with them, but they closed the door to the suite and she was left in the hallway. She went back to her room. She lay on her bed remembering her thirteenth birthday. The third of September, 1939. *Congratulations on entering your teenage years*, her father had written on the card. They had invited her friends for the party. There were bonbons and party hats and whistles set out on the table. There was a festive table cloth and a cake with a marzipan heart sitting in the middle. Her friends had bought gifts and she had opened them with delight, thinking as she unwrapped a jewel box, a heart shaped locket, a book of poetry, that she was unwrapping life itself.

But her father had turned on the radio in another room, and as the party progressed through sausage rolls and little frankfurts and ice-cream he had spent more and more time away from the table. He had missed out on the pulling of the bonbons and even the singing of ‘Happy Birthday’, and she felt her heart crush inside her when he came back into the room with his party hat off to announce into the receding echo of the hip-hip-hoorays and for-she’s-a-jolly-good-fellows that the war had begun. She ran out into the backyard and cried.

She got up from the bed and looked at herself in the small mirror hanging above the chest of drawers. She stood there for a long time, brushing her hair back, making it stand high off her forehead. When that was done she opened the door and walked down the hallway. She stood outside her parent’s door and listened, hearing nothing. She continued downstairs. There was music in the lobby and a crowd of men in uniform with their girls. ‘I’m seventeen,’ she said to herself, pushing her way through the crowd towards the lobby door.

She walked across the road toward the promenade. She brushed the pine needles from one of the benches and sat down overlooking the beach. The clumping surf was grey in the dusk. When the first young soldier strolled up and asked her name she replied, ‘Jennifer’. She did not know where that name had come from.

Question One – This story reveals a side of war not often told, that of the children of soldiers, what did you learn from this story?

Question Two – The ending of this story raises more questions than it solves, why do you think this is?

Question Three – I would like you to write a story 600 – 1200 words about an aspect of war not usually written about.

**On Hearing Samuel Beckett Refute His Birth Date**

**Graeme Harper**

An Extract from the above

...Mother was no fool; she gave birth to me in a clean hostel. Her body, which was slender though big shouldered and strong-armed, ached and wept like hell after my birth, but she told a nurse of no particular acquaintance, ‘We’ll have to celebrate this, get up I’ll embrace you.’

In the first few days I grew eyebrows and formed rashes on my cheeks and chest. My hair, which had come into the world curled and pasted on my head, fell out after two days and new hair began to grow in two days more. Mother said that to watch me was to observe a miniature scene of such speed and ambition that she stood for hours in front of me. Doorbells rang on and on as if they were the bells of Palm Sunday cathedrals. Dinner browned, crisped and burnt in the oven while I twitched my nose and curled my lip for her.

‘Unreal!’ she cried, soon after, ‘he has smiled,’ and a gathering of neighbours was called to witness. I learnt then that my smile had not developed at the same rate as the rest of me but had waited one week in order to prepare me for an audience.

I consumed milk from the breast and grew thicker in the legs and arms. What I did not require I excreted freely and without any care. The few cares I did have burst from me in a voice that I feared because it seemed so closely linked to the tightness in my belly and the itching on my scalp. This relationship of pain and voice intrigued me and caused me to lie awake when I should have been sleeping.

In the first seven days I was passed by faces, legs, arms and abdomens of great size and thought they were complete pictures when they were, in truth, only flashes and fragments. I found that my movement could be brought about by thought and that thought could elicit further thought. Later I cursed this fact and became a champion of cold inspiration (a fact often connected to the ice blue of my eyes).

Before fourteen days were over I knew I was a creature who was not alone and, though unsure of others, I always welcomed the cotton smoothness of mother. I developed an infant idea that linked pain and voice and the sudden appearance of people and I began to trust in it. I believed each day would start and finish when I wanted but when I found this was not the case I became annoyed with time that passed under rules I could not understand and expended itself in light and dark intervals I could not influence. By imitation I learnt my first word: Arrk. I spoke this word eagerly and received various replies. Sometimes these replies were long and tortuous and came with much expression. Other times these replies were brief and inadequate and came in passing. Still other times I would speak and speak and no one would reply.

At the end of the first month my world was Sight, Sound, Smell, Touch, Thought.

Question One – This story is written from the perspective of a baby but not in what we would consider baby language, why do you think this is?

Question Two – write a story from 600 – 1200 words about your time as a baby, write it using the vocabulary you have now, but from the perspective of a baby.

**The Gift of the Gab**

**Barry Dickens**

An extract from the above.

...it’d be a roasting hot summer’s arvo and dad’d suddenly knock off hosing down the fence, his eyes’d light up like a railway station cordial machine and he’d utter those words of joy to the family...’*to the beach then, eh?’.*

We’d grab our grandmother’s and togs and be at the front gate, all sporting Coles’ sunglasses and beachball puncture kits, corktipped badminton bats, fruit cake tins and nose lotion. Not having a car, we’d fry on the Reservoir station, our teeth totally into choc wedges, waiting for that heavenly Vic Rail chariot, whose driver was always Paul Robeson, to sail us away to such troppo-madness ports of call as Aspendale, St Kilda and Chelsea.

I’ll never forget waiting for the beach train. Through the heat shimmer of skinheads, bodgies, spat out Kool Mint and Kit Kat, the tracks baked along with the signals and maggies croaking as one.

Dad cursed the cars rattling down High Street with their roofracks brimming with Super-Pal kickboards. ‘I oughta get a bloody license love’, he’d say, but mum’d hold his hand and unwrap a Mintie for him knowingly. We were happy in those days. Mum always knew best.

The train would finally snore into the station and we’d hop on. Louts would entertain the sweltering passengers. It was an eternity but somehow we always got there, and then dad’d have to buy some more tickets at Flinders street station to go on to the beach.

Huge mobs of orange-fanta ockers queuing up for beach tickets, some families a wonderful primrose, others the same pink as spout-primer, others scarlet vermilion, picked out in pumpkin-yellow towel and chocolate thong.

The conversation’d go a bit like this. ‘Two and six halves return to Bonbeach and a pensioner. Here, there’s a quid there. What? Of course she’s old! Of course she’s a pensioner! Go on mum, tell ‘em how old you are! Look, she’s got a card, isn’t that enough for you.’ Then mum’s say, ‘grab the change love, nothing ya can do about it. Come on, let’s get away for that nice swim, eh? Here Darl, have another Mintie and cheer up a bit...

Question One – This is a typically Australian story – what makes that the case?

Question Two – Create another typically Australian story, 600 – 1200 words but this time make it more modern in tone.

**Writing Workshop One:**

Write in first person, try and get down as much raw material as possible.

You are returning in your mind to a house you know well from your past whose geography you always carry in your imagination. Why is that? Was it a happy or an unhappy place? You are outside this house walking towards the front door. You notice a detail about the outside, maybe from your peripheral vision, and you pause for a moment to concentrate on it more fully. You move right up close to the door and take a key to open it. As the door opens, you are conscious of a smell in the house that you associate with someone. Describe it. You enter the house and make your way to the kitchen where a familiar view through the window reminds you of a particular incident. Notice how you feel about this incident, can you locate the emotional atmosphere of it? You turn away from the window and see an object on the table. It is well known to you and you make some notes about it. You leave the kitchen and go upstairs. On the landing you have to choose which room to go into. When you have made a decision, enter that room and let another memory come to the surface. You take a last look around the room, go back down – stairs and leave the house. How do you feel as you leave it – reluctant, sad, relieved, disturbed, nostalgic?

Now read through this material and circle any parts in pencil that you don’t like and underline those parts which you like because of their accuracy, emotional potency or the way the writing brings the place to life. Then rewrite using third person narration, that is ‘he’ and ‘she’, remembering that you can now change and invent as much as you like.

**Workshop Writing Exercise Two:**



Looking at the picture above, what is the first detail you notice?

Think about what might be happening just outside the frame and to the right. Now pretend that you, or a character that you invent, has just discovered this photograph. Use it more imaginatively, create a story about it.

**Workshop Writing Exercise Three:**

In November 1988 the Guardian printed a six-inch double column account with photo of a mysterious stowaway discovered on a Cypriot cargo boat six days out of Felixstowe. The Jonny Two sailed to East Africa and back but the Home Office refused to let the man land so he repeated the trip, a five month journey of 40,000 miles. He refused to speak. He lived on fresh fruit and vegetables and drank only water, except for two or three beers. No one had a clue who he was but they called him Johnny Two. Then there was a follow up in January 1989 a five column follow up appeared in the Guardian. The Home Office has relented. The man is in hospital where psychiatrists are trying to persuade him to talk. But nothing has appeared since.

It is up to you to decide who this man was, a traumatised amnesiac, a vegan fanatic, a criminal, a refugee? In the newspaper, Johnny’s long face is framed by hair and he stares expressionless. Write a story through the mind and senses of Johnny, what is his real name, how does he speak, is he trained in some occupation?

**Workshop Writing Exercise Four:**

Big occasions like weddings, funerals, and Christmas celebrations put everyone on public display. There is a lot of comic potential in these types of social rituals. Visualise a family gathering, remember everyone who was there. You’ll know them in varying degrees of intimacy; some you’ll know very well, others you’ll never have seen before. You could put them all around a table, or outside in a sports setting. Write about them in as much detail as you can, focusing on their behaviour together. Families can be extremely complicated, especially now divorce is so common. At a wedding, there might be several sets of parents and grandparents. Ex-spouses size up one another’s new partners. You might feel most interested in the people you know least well. Build up each character, describe the setting. Now focus on one character, why are they there, what is there place in the family, what happens to him or her throughout the day/night.

**Workshop Writing Exercise Five:**

Author Graeme Green advocated writing autobiographically but changing one thing. Think of something that changed your life. It could be something as trivial as a new haircut, or it could be a relationship breakdown, moving house, etc. Make some rough notes, trying to pinpoint the exact moment of change, and relive what it felt like.

Now, make your change. Alter a setting, or switch characters, while keeping to a first person narrative. One alteration may lead to another, this is how we change from non-fiction to fiction writing.

**Workshop Writing Exercise Six:**

Think of any traditional fairytale – Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Rumplestiltskin, etc.

Re-write the tale as a modern story. Think of women’s and men’s roles in society today – courtship, employment, etc. What aspects of the story would change, which would remain the same.

**Workshop Writing Exercise Seven:**

Writing your own chiller story.

Who – you need one strong ‘good’ character (protagonist), and one or two friends of the protagonist. You also need one strong evil character (antagonist), perhaps a monster or a ghoul.

When – present or past tense, stories written in the present tense can be more exciting, but difficult to maintain.

Where – remember ordinary locations can be scary too, or you can think of typical scary locations, haunted house, etc.

What – you need a plot line, for example an inventor creates a potion that changes people into savage rats and accidentally drops it into the water system.

How – you also need a trigger, an event that sets the story in motion. For example, the main character has had an operation and can’t drink water for 24 hours, when she leaves the house she discovers the savage rats.

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